



## The Pygmalion Effect

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Once upon a time, Pygmalion, a lonely sculptor, created from stone a lady figure which represented his ideal woman to exact human size. When finished, the sculpture looked like a real woman. The face showed a beautiful smile, its body was fabulous. Friends of Pygmalion said, "No matter how beautiful it is; a statue is just a statue, not your wife."

The sculptor fell in love with the statue. He hoped, wished, and prayed for the statue to become real. Because he was so sincere in his request, Aphrodite turned the statue into a living being. It became known as the "self-fulfilling prophesy."

This effect of positive thinking is called Pygmalion Effect. Research has clearly shown the power of holding positive expectations of others. We get the outcomes that we expect.

The power of the Pygmalion effect, first captured by psychologist Robert Rosenthal in his study of elementary school children, has been well documented as a simple and effective way to boost performance - in the classroom, in the workplace, and elsewhere.

In his study of elementary school students, Rosenthal led teachers to believe that certain pupils in their classrooms had been identified as "intellectual bloomers" - children who would show an intellectual growth spurt during the school year. In actuality, the students were randomly given the designation of intellectual bloomers, but at the end of the term, these students did indeed show higher academic achievement. Why? Because the teachers believed in them. How? Later studies showed that teachers unconsciously gave more positive attention, feedback, and learning opportunities to these students. In short, teachers were able to "nonverbally" communicate their positive expectations for academic success to these students.

So how does this apply to us, our relationships and workplace? Let's consider an example

You are new to an organisation and it is your first day. Your role will involve managing other people. You will be receiving a handover from the outgoing manager. In the handover, the manager provides you a briefing on your team members. As a passing comment with no malice or intention, the manager says "Just to help you out you probably should know that Joe can be a bit of a trouble maker and need attention and Jane, she is a star performer".

What happens? You have probably seen it or unconsciously been part of it

If Joe makes a mistake, what do you think? – "Typical! I was warned about this."

What if Jane makes a mistake? "That's unlike Jane!"

Now if Jane does something good – "Yep, that Jane all over".

If Joe does something good - "Joe must be having a good day!"

How does this play out for you in your relationships with others in all aspects of your life – self, relationships both within and outside of work, or even as team leaders and managers of others. How does this impact your behaviour towards others and in turn the outcome – "the self fulfilling prophecy?"

The implication of the Pygmalion effect for leaders and managers is massive. It means that the performance of your team depends less on them than it does on you. The performance you get from people is no more or less than what you expect: which means you must always expect the best. As a leader, simply holding



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positive expectations about team members' performance can actually lead to better team performance.

We are all human. It is not easy – it is like someone plants a seed in your mind and your goal is to not water it. Instead we would want to focus on what is positive about ourselves and others and expect this. It is about finding the benefit or good in what others bring and acknowledging this. Coming from a strengths based approach, people tend to flourish.

Your expectations of people and their expectations of themselves are the key factors in how will people behave and perform. The power of expectations cannot be overestimated. We all have expectations of those we interact with. We communicate these expectations consciously or unconsciously.

Can you imagine how behaviour and performance will improve if you communicate positive thoughts about people to people? If you actually believe that everyone has the ability to make a positive contribution, the telegraphing of that message, either consciously or unconsciously, will positively affect another's behaviour – be it your children, partner, team member or anyone else you have a relationship with.

And, the effect gets even better than this. When we hold positive expectations about people, we help individuals improve their self-concept and thus, self-esteem. People believe they can succeed and contribute and their performance rises to the level of their own expectations.

The Pygmalion effect equally applies to the expectations about ourselves. When we expect bad luck, misfortunes dog us. When we daily expect miracles, we shape our outcomes positively. Our fortunes are not only determined by our actions, but also by our expectations. People have been known to succeed when no one believed or expected them to. However, it is almost impossible for anyone who does not believe in himself nor expect himself to succeed to achieve anything worthwhile. How does this play out in your own life?

Expectations can inspire excellence or destroy drive. Expectations can change reality.

Have great expectations for the people around you and “act as if” for as Goethe said, “Treat a man as he is and he will remain as he is. Treat a man as he can and should be and he will become as he can and should be.”

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